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ABSTRACT

Researchers have recommended that career exploration and awareness begin before high school, when students have already made major decisions about courses. To encourage students to make informed decisions, it is argued that middle schools must introduce career awareness, such as the concept that success in most careers requires education and training. Interest inventories and aptitude tests, field trips, Career Days, and community partnerships are among the tools that can increase students' awareness of their own interests and help them learn about a wide variety of occupations. This digest describes how Glasgow Middle School in Fairfax County, Virginia has been implementing these recommendations with funding from a US Department of Education GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) grant. (Contains 11 references.) (GCP)

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Gearing-up For Career Awareness

Profile of a Middle School Career Program

Kathleen Marcos

2003
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Rationale

Throughout the last decade, researchers have recommended that career exploration and awareness begin before high school, when students have already made major decisions about courses (Castellano et. al, 2002; Fouad, 1995; O'Brien, et. al, 1999; Toepfer Jr., C.F., 1994). In many cases, students passively follow career paths simply by *not* choosing from their high school classes the courses needed for technical or other careers. To encourage students to make informed decisions, middle schools must introduce career awareness, such as the concept that success in most careers requires education and training (Fouad, 1995). As the National Alliance of Business recommended in its 1999 publication *Preparing Young People for Tomorrow's Workplace*, "Middle school is an ideal age at which to expose students to the challenging world of work" (p.5).

In their article *Broadening Career Horizons for Students in At-Risk Environments*, O'Brien et al. (1999) state that "Few middle schools adequately address the career development of students in at-risk environments despite evidence to indicate that interventions can enhance academic performance, facilitate high school completion, and encourage postsecondary education" (p.216). Because students who drop out of high school often begin to disconnect in middle school or earlier, interventions that give the school experience focus and meaning are critical (Castellano et al., 2002).

Elements of successful career awareness programs have been described in numerous publications (Kerka, 2000; Maddy-Bernstein, 1997; Toepfer, 1997; Toepfer, 1994). Interest inventories and aptitude tests, field trips, Career Days, and community partnerships are among the tools that can increase students' awareness of their own interests and help them learn about a wide variety of occupations (Hogan, 1995). As students gain understanding of the preparation needed for specific careers, they may begin to consider the role that postsecondary education and training could play in their futures.

This article describes how Glasgow Middle School in Fairfax County, Virginia has been implementing these recommendations with funding from a US Department of Education GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) grant. GEAR-UP Glasgow's career education model is based on reviews of the literature and consultation with the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) Career Connections office.

The GEAR-UP Glasgow Program

The US Department of Education GEAR-UP program aims to increase the number of low-income students prepared to enter postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Glasgow has a large population of at-risk students, including many English language learners. Approximately 70% of students receive free or reduced lunch.

At Glasgow, GEAR-UP sponsors summer and after-school programs, tutoring, and other activities. A key component of the program focuses on career awareness. Since April 2001, GEAR-UP has funded a full-time Career Center Specialist, and has purchased computers, software, and print resources. Key elements of the initiative are described below.

Career Inventory Software

All 6th, 7th, and 8th graders complete computer-based interest inventories. Career inventories help students articulate their interests and identify matching careers. Working with these self-assessment tools is an important early step in career awareness made possible through the availability of a mobile computer lab with 20 wireless laptops. The Career Center Specialist brings the lab to students in their classrooms and conducts the lesson during regularly scheduled classes.

Glasgow uses *CX Online* and *Choices* software from Bridges, Inc. The programs prompt students to answer questions about their interests, then offers career ideas. Next, students research one occupation to determine the training and education required and the salary range. Use of the software occurs in the context of a lesson describing education options (two-year college, four-year college, advanced degree, military training, apprenticeships, and other on-the-job training) and an explanation that postsecondary education is available and affordable for all.

Articulated lesson plans from *Career Connections Across the Curriculum for Middle School Students* (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2001) have been implemented at each grade level. Additional units have also been developed as needed. For 6th graders, activities include general discussions and completion of the *CX Online Career Finder* inventory, followed by research on specific careers. Seventh graders complete personal timelines and occupational family trees. Eighth graders have worked on electronic budgeting programs; given themselves "performance evaluations"; viewed videos about work habits; and learned how to search for part-time jobs. Both 7th and 8th grade classes have researched jobs using online newspaper classified ads at *www.washingtonpost.com*, *www.nytimes.com*, and other sites.

Integration of Career Education into the Curriculum

To help them connect the subjects they study to the workplace, students learn about careers in areas such as science, math, social studies, foreign language, art, and music. A typical lesson begins with a brainstorming activity in which students suggest careers in the subject area. Next, the Career Specialist makes additional suggestions and describes the education and training needed for various careers. Lessons conclude with students researching one or more careers.

For example, working with 7th grade social studies teachers, the Career Specialist developed a lesson that tied into study of 19th and early 20th century entrepreneurs. Students learned about jobs during that time period, then learned how employment has evolved, concluding the lesson by researching a modern-day job requiring the use of technology.

Career Day

GEAR-UP Glasgow organized and implemented Career Days in November 2001 and October 2002, bringing almost 150 speakers from businesses, organizations, government agencies, and the local community to speak to approximately 1,200 students. In small groups, students heard three speakers discuss their work, their education levels, and the experiences that led them to choose their careers. Groups have been small enough to allow speakers to share personal experiences and entertain questions. Among the speakers were airline pilots, information technology specialists, lawyers, nurses, a congressman, a meteorologist, veterinarians, artists, sports professionals, journalists, restaurant managers, and construction workers. Career Day was fully supported by teachers, who introduced the speakers and remained in classrooms. Several teachers and counselors also shared their work experiences.

Career Assemblies

Further building on the idea that adult role models motivate students to achieve, GEAR-UP Glasgow holds career assemblies to bring to school

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professionals who describe their work and education. Speakers discuss the experiences that inspired them or obstacles they overcame. For example, a theater director discussed his experiences as an immigrant from Cuba who became a successful professional in the US. He spoke to two groups in English and to another—a group of recent Latino immigrants—in Spanish, encouraging all to work hard and go to college. Other professionals who met with Glasgow students included police officers, marketing specialists, engineers, accountants, a Washington Redskins Coach, and a TV news reporter.

Community Partnerships

One particularly fruitful partnership with a local hospital resulted in a "Groundhog Job Shadow" experience for the students. Participants visited the Cardiac Critical Care, maternity, and pediatric units. Another result of this relationship has been Glasgow's participation in a summer nursing camp. GEAR-UP encourages attendance by promoting the camp to students and parents. The experience offers opportunities to observe patient care and surgery. Students learn to take vital signs and understand what they mean. Nursing camp gives young people a clear picture of the profession.

College Planning Workshop

In 2002 and again in 2003, the Career Center has sponsored workshops to help parents plan and save for college. GEAR-UP organized the workshops, provided speakers (in English and Spanish), provided an interpreter for Arabic-speaking families, and offered dozens of handouts. The speakers described postsecondary options; explained the concept of expected family financial contribution to college costs; and discussed scholarships. Parents were given valuable planning information years before they would have otherwise received it. To ensure that all Glasgow parents had access to these resources, program staff mailed families key handouts and a summary of the discussion in English and Spanish.

College Visit

During both full years of the grant, 7th grade students at Glasgow have visited the campus of George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia to tour classrooms, learn about student life, and eat lunch with college students. By helping middle school students visualize the college experience, GEAR-UP Glasgow helps them see themselves as college bound. The experiences have left many students considering a future that includes postsecondary education.

Web site

Web pages (www.fcps.edu/GlasgowMS/career) provide information for parents and the community about the mission of the GEAR-UP Career Center and provide links to FCPS and national resources on careers and college. Students can also link to the *CX Online* program to continue career exploration at home.

Conclusion

To help our many at-risk students relate academic achievement to success at work, GEAR-UP Glasgow has implemented recommendations made by career education experts. Students have responded enthusiastically to the initiatives undertaken thus far, completing career inventory programs; learning about careers in subject areas; attending Career Days and assemblies; job shadowing; visiting colleges; and using career resources' at the school Web site. Through mailings and workshops, GEAR-UP Glasgow also reaches out to the parents who are such a critical part of its mission.

Many resources exist to help middle schools implement these and other programs. While financial considerations may limit the size and scope of the initiatives undertaken, career awareness experiences are essential for students to learn the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century.

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